

DELTA/CALFED

EDITORIAL/Modesto Bee - March 22, 1998

The Delta's destiny: CalFed presents a rare chance at consensus

There is no road map for settling decades of water disputes in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta for CalFed, an extraordinary coalition of government agencies, cities, farmers and environmentalists. CalFed attempts to build a consensus where the scale of competing water demands has meant none has ever existed.

For wildlife, the Delta is the largest estuary on the West Coast. For 22 million Californians, the Delta is a source of drinking water. For San Joaquin Valley farmers on millions of acres of land, the Delta converts desert into crops. Today the system operates to no one's complete satisfaction through an engineered network of dams and pumps and a legal entanglement of water contracts and endangered species laws. CalFed last week suggested ways to better manipulate the Delta by rejiggering both water engineering and water economics.

Now the consensus-building must begin. Yet in this new strange world of diplomacy, too many participants are behaving like fish out of water.

Some agribusiness interests, for example, have circumvented the CalFed process by drafting, with their traditional Capitol allies, proposals for up to \$400 million in bond subsidies for new dams. This is an old-school power play that hurts CalFed, which has yet to even begin to find common ground on the topic of water storage.

Cities, meanwhile, are ducking the fact they are pursuing another peripheral canal. They use terms like "isolated facility" to describe CalFed's proposal to build a canal around the Delta to deliver cleaner, safer water to cities. Yet it is not only appropriate to call this a peripheral canal, it is intellectually honest. To have any chance of selling the idea to the public, cities must confront concerns about a peripheral canal head-on.

Environmentalists, meanwhile, are tiresomely negative, blasting CalFed as a "repackaging of tired ideas" even while forwarding no specific package of their own.

Environmentalists also appear in conflict with themselves. Some envision CalFed's centerpiece as a vibrant free-market system to shift existing water supplies from willing sellers (mostly farmers) to willing buyers (the

government, on behalf of the environment and cities). Others envision a government-heavy approach that frees up water supplies by adopting stiff new conservation laws. The environmentalists must first resolve internally their priorities and then present a tangible proposal so that CalFed can better address their legitimate concerns.

Last but not least is the dysfunctional relationship between Gov. Pete Wilson and Interior Deputy Secretary John Garamendi, who called the governor a "venal toady" in an internal memo that was leaked to Congress last year. There have been no subsequent toady eruptions. Yet Wilson declined to share a podium with Garamendi at a CalFed kickoff on Monday and instead arranged his own press conference. It's hard to see how Wilson in his final months as governor can help shape the Delta's future if he won't show up in the same room with Garamendi, much less discuss water policy with him.

The unprecedented goal of CalFed is for farmers, cities and the environment "to get better together." For that to happen, everybody first must get real. ##